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Looking for a Reason: An Exploration of Why Students Empathize With Some Characters Over Others

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**LOOKING FOR A REASON: AN EXPLORATION OF WHY STUDENTS
EMPATHIZE WITH SOME CHARACTERS OVER OTHERS**

by

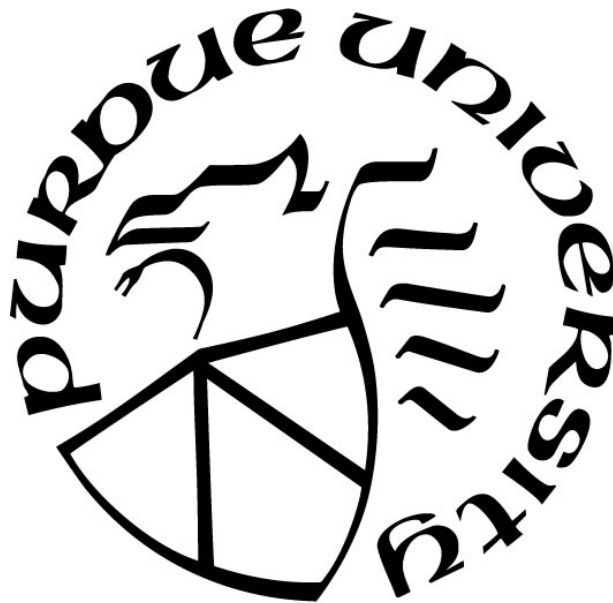
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A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Purdue University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Education



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Dedicated to my students both past and present

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe so much to so many people for all the support, guidance, inspiration and love given to me throughout this process. To my family: Thank you for your constant support and love. I'm not sure words can express my gratitude for the opportunities you have provided for me that have shaped me into the person and educator I am today. Spencer, thank you for your patience and support and for talking me down off the ledge when I needed it. I love you!

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ABSTRACT

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Title: Looking for a Reason: An Exploration of Why Students Empathize With Some Characters Over Others.

Major Professors: Melanie Shoffner and Tara Johnson.

In this study, 8th grade Language Arts students read the young adult novel, *Torn*. The study then looked to explain why the students empathized with some characters in the novel over others and the implications the findings could have in regards to classroom practice. The objective of the research was to develop an understanding of why students empathize with particular characters over others in order to inform future studies of empathy development in adolescents. In order to achieve this, the study employed the methodologies of grounded theory and action research to build upon the existing literature about empathy and young adult literature. The study found the three main reasons students empathized with characters were shared experience, shared personality traits, and shared values. For teachers looking to help their students in their development of empathy, it would be beneficial to use literature reflective of student and adolescent experience, namely young adult literature, and to incorporate reader response strategies.

INTRODUCTION

It was my school's annual Veteran's Day program and as I observed the students during the guest speaker's presentation on his recent experiences in Iraq, I noticed something other than the typical student restlessness that has a tendency to occur during school convocations. The students chatting amongst themselves didn't seem to care about the speaker and his experiences during his tour in Iraq. There were a few younger students who asked questions, some about the locals and the children, but these questions were not centered on concern for these people, and there were no questions about his fellow soldiers. I was surprised to say the least; the guest speaker was a young presenter whose child attended the school. He had pictures and artifacts from his time in Iraq, and was making a clear effort to engage the students. However, with another Acuity test coming up, I neglected to address it in class.

Interestingly enough though, when conducting a unit on the Holocaust, my students were able to truly feel for those victims and were able to make connections. For example, we read a poem called "Wagon of Shoes," and watched a brief video clip of an historian who had a shoe found at Auschwitz that he concluded belonged to a little boy who probably was not any older than three. This strongly affected a lot of the students, especially those with younger siblings.

In conjunction with our readings on the Jewish refugees in Europe during the Holocaust, we discussed the Syrian refugee crisis. Students read articles and saw photographs that nearly brought me to tears, but in discussions they seemed unaffected and they just could not seem to grasp why the Syrians did not stay and fight. There was a lack of ability and willingness to see and understand the events and decisions from the refugees' point of view. This train of thought floored me. I struggled to understand why students could empathize with victims of the Holocaust, an event that occurred over 70 years ago, but not with the Syrian refugees, victims of a current crisis.

The perceived lack of empathy students expressed during the convocation and during the readings has the potential for negative repercussions. In Carolyn Calloway-Thomas' *Empathy in the Global World* (2010), she makes a case for the basic importance of empathy within society: "...unless human beings have robust habits of mind and reciprocal behavior that leads to empathy, society as we know it will crumble" (p.7). This seems to be demonstrated time and again especially in recent events worldwide.

Seaman (2012) then takes it a little further by specifying why empathy is important, especially for students: "If you can provide a safe environment where students can listen to these stories and feel compassion...then these feelings will resonate in their own lives and their morals will strengthen." (p.27) Development of morality, especially within young adults, is of the utmost importance and is an admirable trait that comes into play in all aspects of a person's life. Empathic development in adolescents can be helpful in combatting bullying especially in middle schools, where bullying is often prevalent. As discussed in Williford, Boulton, Forrest-Bank, Bender, Dieterich, and Jenson (2016), with an increase in cognitive empathy, bullying can decrease. Empathy has the power to combat bullying and increase compassion for others as it allows people to not only learn about but to understand the lives of people who have different beliefs and views than they do. It gives the ability to connect not only with those people who share commonalities, but also to those who may share absolutely no common thread at all (Calloway-Thomas, 2010).

This connects especially to cultural empathy and "being capable of understanding others across time and space" (Calloway-Thomas, 2010, p.11). The term culture can refer to any number of different ways in which people may identify themselves, whether that be religion, ethnicity, or sexuality. What is important is that the ability to empathize brings people together in a surge of humanity (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). So, while it was important that my students could empathize

with the victims of the Holocaust, it became increasingly clear that they needed the ability to be able to empathize with other groups of people as well, not just those with which they could easily identify.

These sources demonstrate the importance of empathy development in people, especially young adults. The purpose of this study was to take this development of empathy a step further by examining whether students empathize with characters in young adult literature and why they empathize with those particular characters. My desire was that, through reaching an explanation of why students empathize with particular characters and not others, I could strengthen my own classroom practice through aiding my students in their empathic development. By informing my own classroom practices, I can support further research that can inform future studies of empathy development in adolescents.

The following questions reflect my purpose and guided my research:

1. Why do 8th grade students in a Language Arts class express empathy with some characters in a young adult novel over/instead of others?
2. How can understanding 8th grade students' empathetic connections inform my own classroom practice?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Through my observations of middle school students within the classroom and during assemblies, I have noticed that they appear to lack empathy for certain characters. Because the ability to empathize with different characters and people is of utmost importance in a person's moral and social development, an understanding of what empathy is and how it is developed, especially in the context of young adult literature, is an integral piece to being able to guide students in developing empathy (Seaman, 2012; Calloway-Thomas, 2010). In order to aid in the development of empathy, it is imperative to understand what exactly empathy is.

What is Empathy?

When people mention empathy, some may think of Atticus Finch's famous line from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (p.30). Atticus' quote is a good representation of the general concept of empathy. The concept of empathy has been studied by numerous researchers in different content areas, and while researchers may have slightly differing views of empathy, they all seem to be in agreement on a few aspects. Keen (2006) defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect [that] can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading" (pg. 4). Both Belzung (2014) and Frans de Waal (2008) reiterate that empathy is one's ability to relate to another's emotional state; however, the concept is not necessarily as straightforward as it may seem.

There are different degrees of empathy as discussed by both Catherine Belzung (2014) and Frans de Waal (2008). One degree of empathy is sympathy or sympathetic concern. Sympathy is

having a desire to care for another person in a non-self-serving way, but not necessarily fully grasping the weight of what that person is actually feeling (Belzung, 2014; de Waal, 2008). Oftentimes there is confusion between the concepts of empathy and sympathy. Though the two are very similar, and in a way related, they are not the same thing. While empathy is being able to place yourself in someone else's shoes, and to have the ability to relate to and understand what that person is feeling and thinking, sympathy is not as deep of an understanding of the other person. When you sympathize with someone, you are aware of what the other person is feeling, sadness for example, and you wish to be able to do something to alleviate the sadness. When you empathize with someone, you are capable of understanding and of actually feeling what the other person is feeling.

Cognitive and Emotional Empathy

Cognitive empathy is having the ability to truly understand another person's thoughts, feelings, and desires (Belzung, 2014). It is a more advanced level of empathy, and it requires a higher level of cognition than emotional empathy. Emotional or affective empathy has more to do with a simple reaction to another person's emotions than actually understanding and feeling the same emotions of another person (Belzung, 2014; de Waal, 2008). That being said, cognitive empathy cannot be achieved or felt without first having the ability to feel affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is the highest degree of empathy and an integral part of cognitive empathy is perspective taking. Perspective taking is understanding someone else's point of view without mistaking it for your own. The factor of perspective taking that contributes the most to the development of cognitive empathy is the theory of mind. This is when the person or animal, as de Waal (2008) argues, is aware of and is able to apply mental states to themselves and to others including beliefs, thoughts and feelings. Having the ability to feel and achieve cognitive empathy

increases a person's social abilities because it allows them to relate better to others (Belzung, 2014).

Importance of Teaching Empathy

Empathy has been linked to prosocial behavior in children and young adults and, as a result, also allows them to connect better with peers and have better relationships with people (Bang, 2013). While not everyone is automatically caring and respectful towards others, developing empathy can turn that around. As the world figuratively shrinks in terms of people coming into contact with others who may be different than them, especially through technology and media, it is becoming increasingly important for people to be able to understand the values and behaviors of others (Calloway-Thomas, 2010). The classroom offers a safe setting where students not only learn about others, but can develop an understanding and compassion for them. Empathy and tolerance for and acceptance of people who may be different can permeate the lives of those who possess these skills (Seaman, 2012). As Calloway-Thomas (2010) so aptly puts it, "Empathy is the moral glue that holds civil society together..." (pg. 7).

Books Support Empathy

One way to develop and teach empathy is through reading and studying fiction. As a result, narrative empathy is established. Narrative empathy is "a type of empathy that results when a human reader experiences a fictional, narrative text" (Alsup, 2015, p.40). In her chapter, "Literature and Empathy," Alsup (2015) suggests that through reading fiction, the reader has the ability to go through the different degrees of empathy by responding to the text bodily: increased heart rate, sympathy with a character and placing themselves in the situation of a character (p. 41).

Another aspect of narrative empathy is the techniques used by authors to engage the reader's empathy and form a connection between the character and the reader. Keen (2006), author of *A Theory of Narrative Empathy*, discusses the techniques of character identification and narrative situation. Character identification, while not an actual narrative technique, is a result of certain techniques incorporated by the author in the hopes of fostering connections between the character(s) and the reader. Direct and indirect characterization fall under this category as they give the reader information about the character(s) in terms of their personality and how others view them.

Narrative situation focuses mainly on the type of narration (first person versus third person) and how this positions the character in the text. While these aspects seem to aid in creating an empathic connection between the reader and the text, research on the extent to which these techniques affect narrative empathy are relatively inconclusive (Keen, 2006). Harbus (2016) offers a specific example of narrative empathy in "Emotion and Narrative Empathy in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," in which she discusses the "empathetic accessibility" (p.605) of the text through narration, description, and the actual dilemmas Sir Gawain encounters. She argues that through these aspects of the text, empathy with the character is formed: "it achieves its artistic appeal and didactic potential through this rich affective territory and its sustained invitation to identify and empathize with the all-too-human hero" (Harbus, 2016, p.605). While this article offers a look via literary analysis at how narrative empathy within fiction can develop and look, there is a lack of research focused on the specific strategies employed to develop narrative empathy within readers.

Young Adult Literature and Empathy

As narrative empathy suggests, empathy can develop while reading fiction. Other studies have established that empathy can be developed through the study of and engagement with literature (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014; Seaman, 2012). The studying of literature in these studies included establishing background knowledge, guided reading, class discussion, and written responses which resulted in empathic development in students (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014; Seaman, 2012).

Young adult literature is an excellent avenue to help foster empathy in adolescents. The nature of young adult literature lends itself to the development of empathy because it more accurately represents their lives (Nikolajeva, 2014). Because young adult literature is aimed towards young adults, it is generally accessible to them, and may help them in understanding themselves and each other, which may support a developed sense of empathy (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Nikolajeva, 2014).

The concept of a novel reflecting a reader's experience is that of literature acting as a mirror (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). When readers can see their own lives, identities, or experiences reflected back to them, they are validated in a meaningful way. As the genre of young adult literature grows, the topics and types of characters increase as well (Aronson, 1999). This offers more chances for students to see themselves reflected in the literature. Researchers suggest using young adult literature to develop empathy for people who are outside mainstream society, whether that be because of their race, ethnicity, physical/mental disability, or sexual identity. This not only allows adolescents to see people "like me" in literature, but opens the eyes of their classmates and even teachers to different characters resulting in empathetic responses and understanding (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005). The idea of literature opening readers' eyes to people they may

otherwise not encounter is the concept of literature as a window (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). When readers of young adult literature are introduced to characters that may be different from them in terms of culture or geographical location, but who still share experiences with them, they are experiencing the concept of literature as both window and mirror (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). This literary experience aids in empathic development.

As an example, Seaman (2012) used young adult literature in his 8th grade English classroom. Specifically, he had students read *The Cage* by Ruth Minsky Sender through which students experienced her traumatic experiences as a young Jewish girl during World War II. Seaman (2012) explained his use of this young adult literature in his class: “Exposing teenagers to these experiences allows them to make real-life connections that resonate in their actions towards others.” He also discussed how the Language Arts classroom provides the perfect environment to allow students to make connections with characters and develop empathy due to the multiple reader response strategies that are often incorporated within instruction.

With it being established that reading and studying young adult literature can support the development of empathy, the focus of this study was to take this a step further and add to the understanding of the complexities behind the development of empathy in order to aid other educators in helping their students develop empathy for others.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The qualitative nature and structure of this research supported the use of constructivist theory as a theoretical framework for this study (Patton, 2015). Students may have various reasons for their empathetic connections with certain characters. Using the constructivist lens to look at and analyze student responses to literature means acknowledging that each student's construction and view of the world is valid based on their own individual experiences (Patton, 2015). It is these individual experiences and world views that frame and influence the characters with which students connect. Another aspect of constructivist theory that applies to this study is that, "...phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied..." (Patton, 2015, p. 123). The results of this study may be useful to different settings and students but the results are dependent on these specific participants' self-constructed views.

The pragmatic desired outcome from this study, along with the classroom setting and context of the study, lent themselves to action research as the methodological framework for this study. Action research by nature is broad in its applicability to numerous disciplines, but it is especially fitting in education (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Action research has a cycle of steps that informs its use and therefore the structure of this research study. Identifying the problem, and then employing a type of problem-solving or research methodology to engage the participant in the research, are both general concepts within the realm of the pragmatic aspect of action research (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). In this case, the problem identified was that students seemed unable to empathize with some characters. In this case grounded theory methods were used in conjunction with action research to answer my research questions.

1. Why do 8th grade students in a Language Arts class express empathy with some characters in a young adult novel over/instead of others?
2. How can understanding 8th grade students' empathetic connections inform my own classroom practice?

THE NOVEL

The novel used in the study was *Torn* by David Massey. I chose to use this novel in the study for several reasons. First, I was looking for a novel that was set in a war zone that was appropriate for 8th grade students. This young adult novel was not unnecessarily gory or filled with profanity yet remained true to the military experience, making it an excellent choice for young adolescent readers. Second, this novel contains a diverse group of characters. The different characters offered a wider exploration of why students empathize with some characters over others.

The novel takes place on a British military base in present day Afghanistan. The story is told from the perspective of Ellie, a young, female medic who is new to the base. The story chronicles Ellie's interactions and struggles with her fellow soldiers (Heidi, Yugi, and Gizmo) as well as her adjustment to the intensity of war. During an altercation between Ellie's platoon and local insurgents, the British capture a young boy, Husna. Ellie is charged with finding out Husna's story, and when she gains his confidence his story throws her. Husna claims that the Americans bombed his village and killed his family; Ellie promises to find out the truth about Husna's family.

Meanwhile, a troop of US SEALs moves into the base. Their lieutenant, Ben, has been sent on a mission to find a hidden arms cache in the mountains. Husna knows exactly where the arms cache is, so Ben makes an agreement with Husna that he will investigate the bombing of the village if he guides the SEALs to the arms cache. During the mission it is discovered that a rogue force of the local Afghan Security Forces is responsible for the bombing, and up to that point they were able to pin it on the Americans. Throughout all this, romance is blossoming between Ellie and Ben who are torn between their love for each other and their sense of duty and responsibility to the task at hand.

METHODS

Other studies have established that empathy can be developed through the study of and engagement with literature (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014; Seaman, 2012). The studying of literature in these studies included establishing background knowledge, guided reading, class discussion, and written responses which resulted in empathic development in the participants (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014; Seaman, 2012). With it being established that reading and studying literature develops empathy, the focus of this study was on taking this a step further and adding to the understanding of the complexities behind the development of empathy in order to aid other educators in helping their students develop empathy for others.

Strategy of Inquiry

The strategies of inquiry I used to design my research were a combination of action research and grounded theory. In action research, teachers are the ones who identify the area of interest as well as the ones who go through the research process in order to improve upon their own practices and pedagogy (Martindale & Tomlin, 2010). As Kurt Lewin states, “action research must include the active participation by those who have to carry out the work in the exploration of problems that they identify and anticipate” (Adelman, 1993). Action research reflects the methodological framework of my research and the end goal of this study in developing my understanding of why students empathize with some characters over others to improve the development of empathy within my classroom curriculum. As pointed out by Butterfield (2009), data from an action research study are meant to bring about change and to help solve the problem that was identified by the researcher/educator.

Grounded theory also structured my research because, as Strauss and Corbin (1994) state, “Grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed” (p.273). Per grounded theory, the act of coding and categorizing the data allowed me to ask questions about what I had collected and begin to develop new ideas based on what I found (Butterfield, 2009). In addition, the overarching methods of grounded theory informed this study’s methods, as I searched for why students empathized with some characters but not others: “Grounded theory is a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generates a general explanation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large number of participants” (Cresswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007, p.249). Using the voices of my students and the data collected from them, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1994), it allowed me to explore different explanations.

Strauss and Corbin (1994) also comment on researchers’ duties toward society: “These commitments carry responsibility to develop or use theory that will have at least some practical applications that can be of service to wider audiences” (p. 281). Their mention of the obligation of the grounded theory researcher connects with the practical application portion of action research in the desire for the findings from this study to then inform classroom instruction to aid in the empathic development of adolescents.

Setting and Participants

This study took place at a Midwestern middle school. The school has a total enrollment of 449 students with 38% receiving free and reduced meals and 35% ethnic minority students. The participants were part of my 8th grade Language Arts classes in which I conducted the instruction and research. Representative of the school as a whole, the 8th grade consists of 157 students with

34% receiving free and reduced lunch and an ethnic minority student population of 39% (Latino, Black, Asian, American Indian, and Multiracial). While all students enrolled in my 8th grade Academic Language Arts classes engaged in the literature unit, 33 of the 150 students who signed and returned consent forms were part of the research study. Of the participants, 21 were girls and 12 were boys whose ethnicity was reflective of the 8th grade as a whole, with 33% making up ethnic minorities.

Role of the Researcher

In conducting this study as a teacher, I also took on the role of analyzer and interpreter. I was actively involved not only in the data collection, but also as the facilitator of class discussions and as the teacher of the course. This is my sixth year teaching English/Language Arts and my fifth year teaching 8th grade Language Arts. Choosing to conduct the research within the setting of my own classroom was not simply done out of convenience, but out of a desire to better understand my students and to use this understanding to inform my teaching and potentially that of other educators as well. The rapport I built with my students was advantageous in that not only was I familiar with them, they were familiar with me and comfortable and open during the different data collection points. The relationships I built with my students over the course of the year allowed me a deeper insight and understanding of their responses. While some may wonder if my being the teacher and the researcher negatively affected the data, in that students understand that their responses are not just data but also grades, I have always made it clear to my students that I am not grading them on whether I agree with their thoughts and opinions, but on how well they are able to express their ideas and in simply following directions. In short, my previous teaching experience and rapport with my students was an asset, not a hindrance to the study.

Data Sources

The data sources I used throughout the study were classroom observations, written artifacts, and transcribed class discussions. The written artifacts and class discussions were part of the curriculum and unit plan for *Torn*.

The classroom observations were notes I took at the end of the day that allowed me to review student responses to discussion questions along with their responses to the literature they read, in addition to their interactions with each other (Kolb, 2012). These notes provided data within the context of the setting which resulted in more authentic data analysis (Cohen et al., 2007). For example, while reading the novel together in class, I noted students' reactions to the character Husna's actions. They often found some of his actions and responses to other characters entertaining and amusing. When Husna got upset with a call during a soccer game that was organized on the base, for example, he threw a fit. He accused the other team of fixing the game and stormed off of the field. Students related to this and also found it funny. Before reading through the students' written responses, their positive reactions to Husna were my first clue that he might be one of the characters with whom they would empathize.

The written artifacts include my lesson plans (Appendix A) and student written responses to multiple assignments, which were often open ended questions. The assignments during the unit were part of the curriculum; however, I only used the responses from the students participating in the study. The assignments used are listed below (Appendix B).

- Yugi Journal: an account of events from the perspective of the character Yugi
- Child Soldier Reading: student response to open-ended questions after reading an article about child soldiers in Afghanistan

- Civilian Culture: student response to open-ended questions after reading an article about the importance of soldiers understanding the culture of the country in which they are based
- Dealing with Grief: student response to questions asking them to compare/contrast how the platoon in the novel and a platoon in a news article responded and reacted to the deaths of their fellow soldiers
- Ch 15-16 and Ch 19-20 Response: response to open-ended questions about the content in the chapters
- Self-Sacrifice: student response to articles tiered based on reading ability
- Long Answer: student response to open-ended questions about the novel as a whole
- Character Reflection: student response to a prompt asking them to write from the perspective of a character of their choice about where the character was after the story ended
- Large Group Discussion : student response and discussion using questions focused on empathy and author's purpose

I recorded the class discussion in each of the classes in which I was conducting my research. While all students were expected to participate in the discussion as part of the curriculum, I only transcribed the responses from those students who consented to be part of the study. Although I originally planned on conducting individual student interviews, due to time constraints I did not do the interviews but relied on my other pieces of data. The data collected gave rise to my findings about why students empathize with some characters over others.

Data Analysis

There were two tiers to the data analysis for this study. The purpose of the first tier was to identify the responses that demonstrated empathy and those that did not. The purpose of the second tier was to then delve deeper into the results in search for why students empathized with the characters.

To begin the data analysis, I employed deductive analysis while first reading through student responses (Patton, 2015). Through this initial analysis, I was looking to separate the responses into clear expressions of empathy and no empathy. While coding the responses, I determined that when students used the phrases *I empathize with*, *I connect with*, and *I understand*, they were demonstrating empathy for the character. Statements made by students who expressly stated that they feel empathy for characters were coded as demonstrating empathy. For example, Juliana said, “I feel empathy for Ellie because she was put in many difficult situations when she first got to base, and I’ve also been in difficult situations.” Another example of a student response coded as displaying empathy is that of Tilley: “I connected with Ellie because she can easily take charge of a situation like me.” Tilley used the line “I connected” showing an understanding of Ellie and a way for her to understand where Ellie is coming from. Statements like Tilley’s were coded as demonstrating empathy for characters.

The responses that fell into the category of not demonstrating empathy were separated into two categories: A) an explicit mention of not feeling empathy for characters; and b) a response that was devoid of any mention of empathy or understanding of character. This distinction between the two categories allowed me to separate responses that contained purposeful mention of lack of empathy from those that demonstrated a general lack of empathy. An example for category A is from Pablo: “I don’t feel empathy for any of the characters since I haven’t gone through any of the

things they have.” In this example, Pablo explicitly states his lack of empathy for the characters. An example from category B comes from Natalie in response to a question from the assignment, Ch 15-16 Response. Natalie wrote, “Ellie and Heidi are not friends and this is demonstrated in Chapter 15 when Heidi disallows the final goal, a goal that would have allowed Ellie to win.” While Natalie demonstrates basic comprehension of the events that transpired, Natalie does not demonstrate empathy for either of the characters and does not demonstrate any understanding of what either of the characters are going through; therefore, responses like Natalie’s were coded as not demonstrating empathy.

The second step in analyzing the data was then to utilize open coding to identify why students empathized with the characters and why they did not. This inductive analysis revealed seven sub-categories that students gave for empathizing with characters. These categories were experience, personality, care/values, age, interest, and point of view, and gender (Appendix C).

The first sub-category, experience, reflected any student response where the student connected an experience they shared with the character that led the student to empathize with said character. One such example came from Lawrence, who said, “The main character I feel empathy for is Husna because I can relate to losing family quickly because that happened to me.” This response from Lawrence demonstrates a shared experience of loss of family which led Lawrence to empathize with Husna. Other student responses that referenced a shared experience as a reason for empathizing with a character were coded as such.

The second sub-category, personality, reflected any student response where the student found similarities between their personality and that of a character and used that as a reason to empathize with a character. For example, Ivy found these similarities between herself and Ellie:

“I connected with Ellie because she’s brave and also vulnerable and I find myself that way too.” Ivy’s response demonstrates that her connection with Ellie is based on shared personality traits.

The third sub-category, care/values, reflected any student response where the students found what they perceived to be shared values between themselves and a character. An example is Laura, who said, “I connected with Ellie the most because of the way she treated Husna like she accepted him and was nice to him like no one else was.” Laura values caring for others just like Ellie which led Laura to empathize with Ellie.

The fourth sub-category, age, reflected any student response where the student empathized with a character because of similar age. For example, Jeff stated, “The character that I connect with would be Husna. I connect with him because he was closer to my age than the rest of the characters.” This was coded for age because Jeff explicitly gave that as a reason for empathizing with a character.

The fifth sub-category, interest, reflected student responses where the student connected with a character because of mutual interests. For example, Felicity stated, “The character that I thought I connected to most would be Husna. I connected to Husna because I love soccer too.” This was coded for interest because Felicity was able to connect and empathize with Husna through a shared love of a specific activity of interest.

The sixth sub-category, point of view, reflected student responses where students credited the point of view from which the novel was narrated as a reason for empathizing. Kent stated, “The person I connected with the most was Ellie because most of the story was told from her point of view so that’s the most thoughts I got on the situation.” This was coded for point of view because reading the novel through a specific point of view was the reason Kent gave for being able to empathize with a character.

The seventh sub-category, gender, reflected student responses where students referred to gender as a reason for empathizing with a character. An example of this was when Aaron wrote, “I connected with Ben because he’s an American soldier and a male.” This was coded for gender because Aaron explicitly expressed same gender as being the reason behind his ability to empathize with Ben.

The second category that students’ responses fell into was lack of empathy. These students stated explicitly that they did not empathize with characters for two reasons: lack of similar experience and the fact that the novel was fiction. As stated above, Pablo cited the fact that he did not share any experiences with the characters as his reason for not empathizing with characters. Another student, Delia, stated that, “I don’t feel empathy for them because I know that they’re made up characters and don’t have real feelings.” This reasoning was coded as fiction because the reason Delia gave for not empathizing with the characters is that the novel is a work of fiction.

After reviewing the coding and categorizing for consistency, I was able to separate the sum of data into two large categories (empathy and no empathy) and then pare down those categories further into smaller sub-categories. As the cornerstone of my study was the reasons behind students empathizing with characters, I will spend the majority of the study discussing these findings and what these findings mean for educators.

RESULTS

The student responses revealed that though there were eight characters who were part of the main plot in *Torn*, students empathized with four specific characters: Ellie, Husna, Heidi, and Ben. As previously mentioned, the coding resulted in seven sub-categories of reasons why students empathized with the characters. The categories are experience, personality, care/values, age, interests, point of view, and gender.

Experience

This category was the most common across the board (32 out of the 33 students) and spanned across all four of the characters. The experiences students connected with were not the same as the characters in terms of context; however, the general experiences they empathized with are common amongst many adolescents.

One experience that students found common across multiple characters was the loss of family and friends. This connection led them to empathize with the characters in the novel, especially Husna and Ellie. As students read *Torn*, they found out that Husna's village was bombed, and that his parents died during the bombing. This experience of death and of losing family was the strongest connection students made to Husna. Students also shared similar connections to Ellie. Throughout the novel, Ellie also must come to terms with death, loss of friends, and being separated from family. Ellie's team members, Yugi and Heidi, die during combat plus she is far away from home and talks about how she misses her family. Students found multiple connections with these characters' experiences.

Some students specifically referenced the death of their parents like Lawrence, whose father had died a few years before the unit, who stated, “The main character I feel empathy for is Husna because I can relate to losing family quickly because that happened to me.” Other students mentioned the death of a grandparent and a similar emotion of sadness and anger that Husna expressed, like Julia who said,

I feel empathy for Husna because when Husna’s family died he had a lot of anger towards the Americans who he thought had killed them but he also was angry at them for leaving him and I can relate to that because of when some of my family passed away. I’ve never had my parents pass away but when my grandpa passed away I felt anger because I was like why did he have to die?

In conjunction with this concept of death, students connected with the more general concept of loss of family and being separated from family, whether it was due to moving far away from family like Thomas, whose family lives in Ecuador, or through family separation like Autumn, who only sees her mother every other weekend. Some students referenced a loss of a grandparent that allowed them to empathize with Ellie’s loss of Yugi and Heidi while others, like Olivia, discussed how hard it would be to be away from family: “I wanted them all to go home to their families and get out of the war zone. I have been away from my family for a week. I can’t imagine being away that long.”

Another experience that students connected with across multiple characters was finding themselves in difficult situations and having to make decisions while in these situations. All the characters in the novel found themselves in challenging situations, but the characters students empathized with were Ellie, Ben, and Husna. There are different aspects of being in difficult situations that students connected with.

Students empathized with Ellie in regards to her working to overcome the challenging experiences she faces. At the beginning of *Torn*, Ellie finds herself dealing with some “friendly” hazing upon her arrival at base and all the harrowing experiences that come with being in the middle of a war zone. Autumn said, “I feel empathy for Ellie because she went through difficult situations like I have.” While Autumn has not been in a war zone, she has struggled with insecurities associated with her dyslexia and the struggles with having dyslexia in reading aloud and reading comprehension. This year she began to overcome those insecurities, even sharing a slam poem she wrote about her dyslexia which she performed in front of the class. She was therefore able to connect with Ellie’s struggles to overcome her own challenges.

The students that empathized with the experiences of Ben focused on his struggles as a leader and having to make the hard decisions. Because he is the leader of his troop, he is constantly having to make decisions that affect his whole team and have the potential to be dangerous. Lawrence connected with Ben’s experience of being in a position of leadership. He stated, “The character that I connected with was Ben because he had to take charge of everybody like the two groups and I connected with him because I had to take charge of the football team.” Students also empathized with Ellie’s struggle in making decisions and her desire to always do the right thing. Ellie is often conflicted throughout the novel about choosing between focusing on Ben and on the mission she’s on, and the best way to keep her honest relationship with Husna while still carrying out her duty. As Bethany discussed, “I connected with Ellie because throughout the book she’s been trying to find herself. She also has to choose between what she thinks is right and what she has to do. I feel empathy for Ellie because she tried to follow her beliefs as well as her duty. She had to make hard decisions that she may not have wanted to make.”

Then there were those students who empathized with Husna, who was not only dealing with difficult situations and decisions, but also dealing with a feeling of lack of control. He felt helpless when it came to the death of his family and in his dealings with the British and American soldiers. Students were able to identify with the feeling of being put into a situation or finding themselves in a situation they didn't want to be in and in which they had little to no control over their situation. Felicity referenced a specific situation:

Another reason why I connect to Husna is because he was dropped into something new when his parents died and when he was dropped into a new village at the end. I have been dropped into many things also like the math I am in. I didn't choose to be in the accelerated class. I feel empathy for Husna because he is put in many hard positions.

In association with students empathizing with characters over being placed in difficult situations, the participants also discussed connections they made with Husna and Ellie about the feeling of betrayal and being distracted. Husna felt betrayed when he found out that it was actually a rogue group of the Afghan Security Force who bombed his village. Students discussed how they have felt betrayed before by friends and people they trusted. Ellie felt like she was being distracted by her feelings for Ben from the reality of her situation in the war. Students talked about being distracted, especially by other people, from what it was that they were supposed to be focusing on.

Although fewer students were able to find common experiences with Heidi, those that did empathized with the same experience of making mistakes and dealing with the guilt that comes with it. As the novel progresses, we find out that the medic who had previously been at the base died because of a mistake Heidi made. As Hannah stated, "I feel empathy for Heidi because she thought she deserved to die after the incident with Toni and she blamed herself. I understand how

she feels because I sometimes find myself blaming myself because my stupid mistakes affect others negatively.”

Personality

This category also spanned across all four of the characters, but was second to experience (22 of the 33 students). Students connected with multiple aspects of the characters’ personalities exhibited throughout the novel.

Some students connected with Husna’s personality in terms of his childish and impulsive personality. Dawn specifically said, “I connected with his shy, innocent, bold personality.” While reading, students connected with his responses and actions such as his frustration during a soccer match on the base and his reaction to Omar, one of the men responsible for bombing his village.

In contradiction to Husna’s impulsive personality, some students connected with Ben’s leadership qualities and stoicism. Spencer references his connection to Ben’s leadership qualities: “The character that I connected with was Ben. I connected with him because he is a person that takes charge and feels good about himself. I like to be in charge of things.” In reference to Ben’s more stoic side, Thomas states, “I connected the most with Ben. He is very smart but is quiet about it. He just thinks and talks when he needs to. I am kind of like that. I think a lot but I don’t say much about my thoughts. I joke around sometimes though.”

Students connected with multiple characteristics of Ellie’s personality, like her bravery, vulnerability and determination. She saves Yugi from an IED, but also allows her walls to come down around Ben, making her vulnerable. Ellie also demonstrates a determinedness especially when Heidi constantly questions her ability to handle herself. Penelope said, “I feel empathy for Ellie because she’s very determined to do her best even she’s doubted by everyone.”

In contrast to Ellie's vulnerability throughout the novel, Heidi is a closed-book throughout most of the novel. Eventually the reader realizes that this is a result of the self-blame and guilt she feels over the incident with the previous medic. Janelle especially connected with this part of Heidi's personality: "I connected with Heidi because she was mysterious and had a lot of secrets that she kept close."

Values

The third category was values (13 of the 33 students). This category reflected the values the characters and students shared creating empathy for the characters. The three characters students connected with in regard to shared values were Ellie, Heidi, and Husna.

The care and values that led students to empathize with Ellie were similar to some of the characteristics of her personality. The main one was that she valued taking care of and protecting others. This was especially true in the case of Husna. One student, Olivia, said, "I also feel Ellie really took care of Husna. I can also relate because I have to take care of my sister too." Olivia is very close with her little sister; she wrote her personal narrative about the day her sister was born. So, taking care of her sister is something that Olivia values. This echoed other students who were able to relate because they have also had the responsibility of taking care of others, whether it was younger siblings or family members who were struggling.

In direct contrast to Ellie, Heidi is portrayed throughout the majority of the novel as a hard, uncaring and tough soldier; nevertheless, she was one of the characters most students empathized with because of her values. Heidi has a strong sense of responsibility and is willing to self-sacrifice for the greater good. As Laura stated, "I feel empathy for Heidi because I understand why she put Ben before herself. I feel empathy for her because she died to save Ben. I would do the same for someone I cared about."

Like Heidi, Husna has a strong sense of responsibility and students responded to that. Husna loves his family and feels a sense of responsibility to avenge his family's death and the destruction of his village. Students understood his last main action in the novel of shooting down the plane that held the man who claimed responsibility for the destruction of his village. As Blake said:

I connect with Husna because I feel like if something happened in my family I would think it would be up to me to deal with it. I feel empathy for Husna because he thought that he was doing the right thing to shoot at Omar. I felt the same way because of what Omar did.

Age

This fourth category found in the students' responses (seven of the 33 students) was only found in the discussions and responses about Husna. Although Husna is younger than the 8th grade students at 11, he is the character closest to their age. This closeness in age allows them to understand his actions. As Autumn says, "The character that I connected with was Husna. I connected with Husna because he is a little kid that has no clue what's going on. I'm like this because I am still a kid who is trying to find their way. I would do anything to help even if that meant needing guidance to help with it." Autumn's response connected to Husna wanting to help even though he was technically a child. He was bent on helping the American and British forces to find the arms cache and using their help to discover what happened to his village.

Interests

Students finding common interests between themselves and the characters is the fifth category (four of the 33 students). While this may seem to be a superficial connection, it allows students to see certain parts of themselves in the characters. The two categories of shared interests were Husna's love of soccer and Ben's military career.

Soccer was the first real connection that Ellie was able to make with Husna. They organize a soccer match on the base that Husna plays in with Ellie and some of the other soldiers. As Frank said, "The character that I relate the most to in my mind is Husna. Husna's interest include soccer and the Premier League."

The students that connected with Ben in terms of mutual interest connected with him because of his involvement with the military. They aspire to be in the military so they see their future as a way to relate; as Bobby said, "I connect more with Ben because the career that I want to take is military."

Point of View

Torn is written using first person narration from Ellie's point view. Although she is the character the reader learns the most about, there was only a small percentage of students (three of the 33 students) who referenced point of view as a reason why they empathized with a character. Three students referenced the fact that the story being told from Ellie's perspective led them to empathize with her more than the other characters because they were privy to her thoughts and feelings. One student, Kent, wrote that he was able to empathize with many characters as a result of Ellie's interactions with them, and because the novel was told from her perspective. As Kent said,

I connect with Ellie. I connect with her because in the story we only got her point of view. If the story was told in Yugi's or Heidi's point of view I think I would connect with them more. I mainly connect with Ellie with the way she sympathizes with the people she meets/sees.

Lack of Empathy

While most students were able to connect to and empathize with at least one character, some students struggled to find a strong connection. There were three students who stated they didn't feel empathy for any of the characters in the novel. Of these three students, two explained that it was because they had never experienced war or any of the experiences the characters went through. The third student reasoned that the book is fiction and the characters were not real people, making it difficult to empathize with them.

DISCUSSION

In this study, I was looking to expand my understanding of empathy and empathic development in adolescents. Specifically, I was looking at why students empathized with some characters and not others in the hopes of then using my findings to inform my teaching in the context of fostering empathy in my students.

Regardless of the degree of empathy expressed by students in the study, whether it was more emotional empathy or cognitive empathy, because this empathy was a result of reading fiction, it is contained within narrative empathy. As Alsup (2015) discusses, narrative empathy can be expressed to different degrees whether it is more of a bodily reaction (emotional empathy) or truly understanding the situation in which the character finds him/herself (cognitive empathy). Some students' outrage at the "prank" that Ellie's fellow soldiers did to her demonstrated more emotional empathy, for example. While some expressed their understanding of the situation, most of their reactions were that of feeling bad for her, demonstrating emotional empathy. Students also demonstrated a higher degree of cognitive empathy, especially in regards to the loss that Husna suffers in the novel. Multiple students demonstrate their understanding of what Husna is going through as he struggles with the loss of his family. Throughout this section, multiple examples of students' expressions of empathy are discussed; I will use the term "empathy" as the general term to encompass narrative, cognitive and emotional empathy.

In looking at the results, the most often coded reasons students gave for empathizing with a character were shared experiences, shared personality traits, and shared values. These were the strongest connections students made to the characters. In contrast, there was a steep drop off in the number of those students who offered age, interests, and point of view as reasons for empathizing with the characters. The separation is not just based on numbers, but also based on the level of

superficiality of the connection. In response to my first research question, the reasons behind students empathizing with some characters over others is much more abstract than originally thought.

Major Categories

Universal Themes

Students connecting with characters via shared experiences demonstrates not only their ability to empathize with others but to do so through more abstract avenues.

In looking at the first sub-category, experience, not only was it the most common reason overall, it was the most common reason students empathized with each of the characters individually, with the exception of Ellie. Interestingly enough, it was also the most common reason students gave for not empathizing with characters. This reveals that the use of shared experiences is the strongest indication that adolescents will empathize with a character. In conjunction, a lack of shared experience is also a strong indication that students will not empathize with a character.

Looking back at the experiences students referenced, the experiences they mentioned tend to be fairly universal with adolescents and commonly found in young adult literature (Santoli & Wagner, 2004; Aronson, 1999; Avoli-Miller, 2013). The most common of these experiences mentioned was that of death and/or loss. By the time readers reach their teenage years, they have often been exposed to death or loss in their lives in some way. It could be through death of a loved one, through family separation, or through moving, like the examples mentioned by the students in this study. From looking at student responses, it is clear that the adolescents were able to connect and empathize with multiple characters through the shared experience of death and loss.

Another universal experience that students connected with was that of overcoming difficult situations and struggles. Looking at student responses, they are able to connect with the characters the most over their internal conflicts as opposed to their external conflicts. Looking at the context and setting of *Torn*, this makes sense. None of the participants have been in war before, so many of the external conflicts faced by the characters were not something they could empathize with. However, they referenced the tough decision-making that Ellie and Ben face as a reason they were able to empathize with them.

Another example of internal conflict students were able to connect with was Husna's feeling like he had a lack of control over his situation. This is often a predicament adolescents find themselves in. Adults are often mandating parts of their lives, and this leaves them feeling like they have very little autonomy, which is a concept often found in young adult literature (Santoli & Wagner, 2014; Aronson, 1999). Again, the context is certainly different than what the participants faced, but they still referenced this experience as a reason for empathizing with characters in the book. Their ability to see past the foreign setting and context reinforces that adolescents may not need physical similarities to characters in order to connect and empathize with them; shared experiences can develop empathy as well.

Character Traits

Personality was the second most common reason students gave for empathizing with characters. The personality and character traits of the characters reflected how students view themselves and are reflective of adolescents in general. As adolescents, they are developing concepts of responsibility and leadership while sometimes still giving in to childish impulses (Aronson, 1999). These different traits and aspects of personality found in the characters in the novel are what students connected to.

Of the characters that students connected with due to perceived personality similarities, Ellie and Husna were the ones students connected with the most in this capacity. They mentioned Ellie being both brave and vulnerable which reflects how many of the students view themselves while they also connected to Husna's impulsive and at times childish character traits. Students' ability to connect to both of these characters in terms of personality, although they differ greatly in other respects, reflects the multiplicity of adolescents' personality traits. Adolescents' ability to connect and empathize with diverse characters' personality traits leaves the door wide open for multiple types of characters in the literature used in class to develop empathy.

Actions Reflective of Values

The third most coded reason for students empathizing with characters was shared values based on character actions. Care was one of the main values that students connected with both Ellie and Heidi. Students who connected with Ellie did so for the most part because of how she took care of Husna, and how this demonstrated her value of caring for others. Many students referenced caring for younger siblings as a way of connecting with Ellie who took on the role of an older sibling/mother when caring for Husna. In a similar way, students also connected with Heidi and her manner of expressing her values through her actions. Although Heidi was not as obvious in her expression of care, she ended up demonstrating her deep level of caring through the ultimate sacrifice: she gave up her life to save Ben.

Even though gender was only mentioned by one student as a reason for developing empathy, it seems that gender roles still apply in this category. Students connected with Ellie's action of taking care of Husna and Heidi's damaged psyche which resulted in her sacrificing herself. Both these actions tie in to stereotypical gender roles (Godina & Ramirez, 2017). In contrast, not a single student referenced Ben's values and caring as a reason for empathizing with

him, even though he demonstrates the value of care in looking out for Ellie, Husna, and the rest of his troops. Ben's overly masculine characterization may have prevented students from associating him with the concept of care, which may reflect their ascribing to the concept of stereotypical gender roles (Godina & Ramirez, 2017).

Minor Categories

Of the minor categories, age and similar interests were the most common reasons students gave for empathizing with characters. These categories were only found in conjunction with those students who empathized with Husna and Ben.

Only a small number of students actually connected with Husna through age. While this makes sense as Husna is the character closest to their age (the other characters are 19 and older), it is surprising that more students did not reference age as a connection to Husna. However, the fact that students were able to use age to empathize with Husna reinforces authors' use of teenage characters in young adult literature to create connections to characters who may be considered "others."

Torn is written from Ellie's perspective using first person narration. Because the reader receives more insight into Ellie's thoughts and motivations, students might tend to empathize with her more; however, Husna was the character students empathized with the most, not Ellie. Of the students who did empathize with Ellie, many attributed their empathic connection to the point of view from which the story was told. Contrary to Nikolajeva's (2014) claims about the power of first person narration as one of the "strongest incentives for the reader to engage...", the first person narration appears to have less to do with students developing empathy for the characters than the categories of shared experience, personality, and values. While many young adult novels

are written using first-person narration, student responses in this study indicate that narration may not be a major contributing factor in terms of empathic connections.

In regards to similar interests, students connected to Husna because of his love of soccer and to Ben because of his career in the military. While all the characters with the exception of Husna had military careers, Ben was the only one mentioned in connection with the military. This could be for a few different reasons. It could be in connection to the fact that, of the main characters, Ben was the most successful, so if a student is going to aspire to a career in the military, it would be a successful one. It may also have to do with the actual jobs in the military that the characters had; Ellie and Heidi were medics while Ben was a Navy SEAL. Due to the fact that very few students could find ways to connect via similar interests, teachers looking for ways to help engage students with characters might find connections like shared experience more effective.

Lack of Empathy

The majority of students connected and expressed empathy for at least one of the characters. However, there were some who stated that they did not empathize with any of the characters in *Torn*. As previously mentioned, two of the three students referenced a lack of shared experience as to why they did not empathize with the characters. Those students did mention some connection to characters in other areas, however, they were more focused on the context, specifically mentioning that they could not connect because they had never been in war. This reinforces the importance of finding novels to use in the classroom that students can connect with via shared experiences.

Although these few students were adamant about lack of shared experience being the reason they couldn't empathize, the majority of students disagreed with them, and one student, Ivy, had this rebuttal:

I just want to say I get where you're coming from and I do agree it's just a book, but if it was like a fiction book about something that's never actually happened before I could understand where you're coming from with the whole I don't feel empathy, but it is something that happens in real life.

Multiple students shared Ivy's opinion. The responses of these three students who stated that they felt no empathy for the characters is interesting. Exploring and studying students who do not develop empathy while reading is an area for further research.

APPLICATION

My second research question focused on the pragmatic application of what I learned from the first research question. Knowing that the three most common factors for students empathizing with a character were shared experience, personality, and values, it stands to reason that teachers looking to help their students empathize with characters would use characters that may present as more window than mirror (Tschida, Ryan & Ticknor, 2014). Incorporating characters that expose the reader to new people and experiences instead of simply reflecting back what they already know can be accomplished by bringing young adult books into their curriculum. As stated by Kim and Augsberger (2017):

With all that is going on in the world today, it is no longer enough to simply appreciate differences. We must learn how to understand one another, see each other's humanity, and work toward greater justice. High-quality children's and young adult literature can provide an important first step for helping youth to be exploring these critical viewpoint, as well as to develop empathy and love for the world around them.

Strategies for Developing Empathy Through Literature

Teachers should be looking to incorporate novels in which the characters and students have shared experiences, personalities, and values. Applying this strategy will be particularly helpful for those students who may struggle with empathizing with characters if they don't have shared experiences. The challenging part of this, of course, is that teachers don't know everything about the students in their classroom, especially at the beginning of the school year. This makes it difficult because if adolescents truly connect via shared experiences, how can teachers pick books

for students they don't really know? This is where utilizing the idea of universal themes is helpful. As teachers get to know their students throughout the year, it will become easier to assign readings that their students will be more likely to connect with, and which may help increase and develop the students' empathic development.

Strategies for Responding to Literature

The Language Arts/English classroom is especially conducive to guiding students in their development of empathy not just because of the use of literature, especially that of young adult literature, but also because of the different ways students in the class interact with the texts and each other. One strategy used in the Language Arts classroom is that of journaling, which allows students to organize their thoughts on the readings along with analysis and reflection. Journaling, coupled with small and large group discussion about the text and the issues facing the characters, also opens the door for empathy development as it deepens readers' understanding of the characters and offers students the chance to actively think about the characters in the novel (Gavigan & Kurtts, 2011; Louie, 2005; Nikolajeva, 2014; Seaman, 2012). Add in the provision of background information to provide context for the reader and the classroom environment is ripe for empathic development as the background information gives context and a deeper understanding of the characters and their lives.

There are a few different avenues teachers can use with literature units to incorporate the general strategies previously discussed. Conducting a whole class literature unit would be a good way to start. Base your choice of novel/unit on the character experience that could be considered universal, and look to incorporate books with window characters and mirror experiences. An example of a young adult novel that fulfills these criteria is Julia Alvarez's novel, *Before We Were Free*. The novel is set in the Dominican Republic in the 1960's during the reign of the infamous

dictator, Trujillo. The main character Anita struggles with all the typical challenges of being an adolescent while also worrying for her family's safety as it becomes known that her relatives are involved in a plot to take down Trujillo. Eventually, Anita and her mother join her sister and other family members in the United States. Anita faces death/loss, a feeling of lack of control and other challenges over the course of the novel. This book offers an opportunity for students to connect to a narrator who immigrates to the United States and the opportunity to understand the backstory of an immigrant. This is especially important given the current negative climate surrounding immigrants and the stereotypes and prejudices that continue to be perpetuated by the travel bans and the President's attempt to deport those covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals.

Another way of incorporating this type of literature would be through the use of literature circles. This is an effective manner of utilizing the strategies of personal reflection and small group discussion (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Tunkle, Anderson & Evans, 1999). It also offers the teacher the opportunity to match students with literature that they believe will be the most effective in guiding their students in empathic development. Another perk of literature circles is that they give those students who do not always actively participate in large discussions more of a chance to discuss in the context of a smaller group (Brabham & Villaume, 2000; Tunkle, Anderson & Evans, 1999). Through these discussions, students will have more of a chance to develop empathy through the discussions with peers and the opportunity to learn from the literature they are reading as well as from each other.

In the article, "Hoop Dancing: Literature Circles and Native American Storytelling" (2003) Heather Bruce details her use of literature circles when reading Native American literature and using it to guide students in developing their understanding of Native American culture. When introducing this unit, Bruce (2003) uses the initial step of expanding students' background

knowledge. This is especially important when introducing literature where the main characters differ from the readers in terms of culture. This offers context and allows students to engage more meaningfully with reading, responding and discussing the literature which in turn aids students in developing empathy.

One specific example is students reading Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. While the main character, Junior, experiences many of the universal themes and experiences discussed earlier (death/loss of a loved one, hard decisions, overcoming struggles), the context of these experiences may be foreign to readers. It would be important for readers to have an understanding of Native American reservations and the history of Native American education to really be able to empathize with Junior. Empathy with the character will develop into an understanding and empathy for other Native Americans and some of the injustices they have endured.

The young adult novels previously discussed both present different types of "other" characters. The literary world is full of young adult novels with characters and plot lines that have the potential to open up new worlds to readers, just as *Torn* exposed my students to life in a war zone and the effects it has on everyone involved, from the soldiers to the children caught in the crossfire. Taught in conjunction with the literary strategies previously presented, young adult literature has the potential to develop readers' empathy for a multitude of characters. Kim and Augsberger (2017) present other multicultural young adult novels that could be used in the classroom to develop empathy in readers:

- *My Name is Not Easy* (Debby Dahl Edwardson)
- *Kindred: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* (Damian Duffy and Octavia Butler)
- *Under a Painted Sky* (Stacey Lee)

- *Double Victory: How African American Women Broke Race and Gender Barriers to Help Win World War II* (Cheryl Mullenbach)
- *The Hate U Give* (Angie Thomas)
- *Ms. Marvel. Volume 1: No Normal* (Willow Wilson & Adrian Alphona)
- *American Street* (Ibi Zoboi)

While this is of course not a comprehensive list of all the young adult literature available, the novels presented are an excellent starting point for teachers looking to incorporate young adult literature that encompasses the window/mirror concept with the goal of helping students with empathic development.

My Classroom

As the purpose of action research is to use the research to achieve change (Martindale & Tomlin, 2010), it is important to address how my findings will directly influence my own classroom practices. As this study reinforces the idea that young adult literature may aid in developing empathy in readers, I will continue to include it in my own curriculum as well as to make a concerted effort to encourage my students to read more young adult literature on their own.

More importantly, now that I understand that students who share mutual experiences, personality traits, and values with characters may empathize more with those characters, I will take a few different approaches to literature study and reading in my classroom. Students were drawn to and empathized with Husna the most; through experience, personality, and values, students can connect with characters who are worlds apart from them. As a goal of mine is to develop my students' ability to empathize with those who are different from them, this finding will lead me to more purposeful inclusion of young adult multicultural literature in my classroom. I will include

literature that reflects universal and student experience in order to garner empathy, and not just for the sake of exposing students to new characters. One other adjustment I will make will be the use of more journaling and reflection writing during these units, like some of the assignments I used in the study, instead of solely focusing on writing and prompts that reflect the writing required on standardized tests. Reflecting on the work I have assigned my students, I notice that many assignments are based on what students see on ISTEP+. While I want my students to perform well on the tests, it is also important that they develop into empathetic people, not just good test takers.

CONCLUSION

This study, in exploring why students empathize with some characters over others, found the strongest connections came when students could empathize via shared experiences, personality traits, and values. Therefore, it is imperative to include young adult literature with a variety of characters that also reflect universal experiences in order to support the development of empathy in adolescents.

As an 8th grade Language Arts teacher, part of my job is to guide my students in developing an understanding of the world and the people around them. A large part of this is aiding them in their empathic development. In conducting this study within my own classroom, I am now better able to understand how to reach my students and how to better help them in developing empathy. While I have always tried to incorporate multicultural literature in my classroom, I now realize that I was more focused on exposing students to new people and experiences, but less concerned about my students finding common ground with the characters I wanted them to connect with. The findings of this study will affect the books I choose or recommend for my students along with the guiding questions I use when asking my students to reflect on their reading.

This world is in desperate need of widespread empathy. My hope is that, by starting with reading young adult literature about those who are different from them, my students will begin to develop a sense of empathy for characters that will translate into true, strong empathy for people.

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APPENDIX A. GENERAL LESSON PLAN OUTLINE

Day 1: Introduction

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Brainstorm and discuss general topics.

Learning Strategies:

Students will be given small sticky notes on which they will write what comes to mind when they hear the words: Afghanistan, War, Women Soldiers, Civilians. They will post their sticky notes on larger pieces of paper throughout the room. Afterwards, there will be a large group discussion on the words students placed on the papers.

Students will be given a map of Afghanistan with Helmand Province highlighted to provide image and context.

Students will then begin reading Chapter 1 and complete reading for homework.

Assessment: Sticky notes/Discussion

Day 2: Women in the military

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Effectively express and support claims using text and multimedia

Learning Strategies:

Students will respond to a short writing prompt. Students will watch a video clip on sexual harassment of women in the military and re-visit the writing prompt and student answers. They will engage in small and large group discussion.

Students will be given a list of army rankings, and they will need to put them in the correct order/rank.

Students will read Ch 2-3.

Assessment: Writing prompt response and discussion

Day 3: Point of View

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Identify point of view and then write from opposite point of view.

Learning Strategies:

Students will read the first part of chapter 4 and then re-write the IED incident from Yugi's point of view.

Students will read Ch 4-5

Assessment: Point of view writing

Day 4: Children/Civilians

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Make and support predictions about characters.

Learning Strategies:

Students will read IPCS report on child soldiers in Afghanistan and complete discussion questions in small and large group.

Students will make predictions about the children in the village in the novel like who they are and why they are acting the way they do (Think/Pair/Share).

Students will watch a video clip of actual footage of interactions between soldiers and Afghan children and reflect on any similarities and differences described in the book.

HW: Read Ch 6-8

Assessment: Discussions/Predictions

Day 5: Imagery

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Identify imagery and define type of imagery (metaphor, simile etc.)

Learning Strategies:

Students will take notes and review different types of imagery and figurative language.

Students will then work in small groups to identify examples of imagery in the text. There will be then be a large group discussion on how/what imagery adds to the passages and to a reader's understanding of the literature.

HW: Read Ch 9-10

Assessment: Imagery worksheet

Day 6: Language

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Discuss and explain the importance of understanding "civilian" language and culture

Learning Strategies:

Students will work in small groups to create lists as to why learning about the culture and language is beneficial. Students will also cite examples from the book as support. As large group class will read an article on cultural education in the military. Students will then add to their lists.

If any time remains students will discuss the significance of the girl's quote and how it was explained to Ellie.

HW: Read Ch 11-12

Assessment: Lists and discussions

Day 7: Characterization

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Determine characteristics of the main characters using both direct and indirect examples as support

Learning Strategies:

Brief info/background on football (soccer) and the teams mentioned in the text. Students will complete character sheets for each of the main characters in which they will identify characteristics and use examples from the book as evidence.

Create and discuss predictions about Husna and Aroush.

HW: Read Ch 13-14

Assessment: Character sheets

Day 8: Grief/PTSD

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Respond via writing and discussion

Learning Strategies:

Students will listen to a short article from NPR on soldiers dealing with grief and respond to a writing prompt asking students to make connections between the article and how the characters responded to Yugi's death. Students will share and discuss responses and discuss if they think this response is "healthy" and what could be done to help.

HW: Read Ch 15-16

Assessment: Written responses and discussion

Day 9: Husna's Story

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Respond to reading and demonstrate understanding of reading

Learning Strategies:

Students will respond to comprehension questions centered around the events of chapters 15-16 using RARE response strategy. Students will then have small group discussions based around the questions.

HW: 17-18

Assessment: RARE responses

Day 10: The Briefing

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Define prejudice, identify examples, and create solutions to prejudice

Learning Strategies:

First students will review the briefing and the upcoming mission and reach conclusions about the potential success of the mission.

Students will define prejudice. Students will come up with examples from the book and real life of prejudices. In small groups, students will come up with ideas to address these instances of prejudice. Students will share in large group and discuss what ideas and methods for combating prejudices would be most effective.

HW: Read 19-20

Assessment: Lists/Discussions

Day 11: Romance in the Military

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Evaluate the pros and cons of having a relationship in the military

Learning Strategies:

Students will read article on couples in the military and evaluate the pros and cons of being in a relationship with another member of the military. Students will then discuss the pros and cons of a potential relationship between Ellie and Ben. Students will write a brief response and expressing their opinion on whether a relationship between Ellie and Ben would be a good idea and if they would support their decision to date using examples from the text and the article.

HW: Read Ch 21-22

Assessment: Writing response

Day 12: Mistakes

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Create and support theories of what happened to Husna's village

Learning Strategies:

Students will work in small groups to evaluate the facts that are given about the situation at Husna's village. They will then come up with their own theories on what happened at the village and what happened to Bella. They will share in large group.

HW: Read 23-24

Assessment: Theories

Day 13: The Truth

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Explain events and compare events with previous predictions and theories.

Learning Strategies:

Students will write a summary of what happened to Husna's village. They will then go back to their predictions and theories from the previous day and compare these to the reality of what happened.

Students will also discuss the concept of corruption within the military and its possible effects on others. Use examples from the text as support.

HW: Read Ch 25-26

Assessment: Explanation of events

Day 14: Foreshadowing/Heidi's Death

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Define foreshadowing/find examples of foreshadowing. Discuss concept of self-sacrifice.

Learning Strategies:

Students will define foreshadowing and then explain/connect Aroush to foreshadowing in the book. Students will discuss concept of self-sacrifice. In small groups, students will read short articles of soldiers sacrificing their lives for fellow soldiers. They will then write reflections on the readings and the lasting impression of these soldiers and Heidi.

HW: Read Ch 27-29

Assessment: Reflections

Day 15: Justice?

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Respond to writing prompts and analyze literature.

Learning Strategies:

Students will answer two long answer questions via writing. 1)Is Aroush real or not? Explain 2)

Respond to the quotation from the book “I’m beginning to realize that in war nothing ever ends happily ever after. Especially not for the kids. I’m guessing all you can hope for is to live long enough to make sense of it.”

HW: Finish writings

Assessment: Writings

Day 16: The End

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Reflect on the events of the novel from character’s perspective

Learning Strategies:

Students will read the remainder of the novel in class as large group. Students will then write a reflection as if from one of the characters on the events of the ending of the chapter including thoughts and reactions.

HW: Complete reflections

Assessment: Reflections

Day 17: Discussion

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Engage in small and large group discussion on literature

Learning Strategies:

Students will discuss (in small groups) their reflections and other writings from the past couple days as well as the ending of the novel. Students will then discuss in large group. Unit project will be introduced.

Assessment: Discussion

Day 18-22: Work on PSAs

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Create presentations centered around a military issue

Learning Strategies:

Students will work in small groups to create PSAs centered around a topic of their choosing that was discussed in class.

Assessment: Daily progress checks

Day 23: Presentations

Learning Objectives: SWBAT

Present and provide feedback

Learning Strategies:

Students will present their PSAs and the other groups will provide feedback on the presentations.

APPENDIX B. ASSIGNMENTS

Yugi Journal

Directions: The IED incident with Ellie and Yugi is told from Ellie's perspective. You are going to re-write the incident from Yugi's perspective. Imagine what thoughts are running through his head and the emotions he is feeling. Express these from his point of view up the point where they are walking back to their base.

--Written from 1st person perspective

--Mood should match the level of intensity of the incident

--Include all important parts of the incident

Child Soldier Reading

While reading, answer the questions below in complete sentences:

- 1) Why/How do children end up as soldiers?
- 2) Explain the repercussions of this experience for the children.
- 3) What are the suggested steps for rehabilitating child soldiers back into society? What challenges there are with this process?
- 4) How do you think the children may feel during and after their experiences?

Civilian Culture

- 1) Why is being aware and knowledgeable about other cultures important? Why is it especially important in a military context?
- 2) List 3 things a culturally literate soldier does then explain why these three are important.
- 3) What are some potential outcomes of people learning about other cultures?

Dealing with Grief

Answer the questions below in COMPLETE SENTENCES.

1. How did the platoon deal with Yugi's death? Do you think this is "healthy" response? Explain.
2. What similarities are there between how the soldiers in the article and the soldiers in the novel dealt with death? What are differences are there?
3. How does Heidi's previous experience affect her relationships with people?
4. Make predictions: How do you think Yugi's death will affect the platoon in the long run?

Ch 15-16 Response

Directions: Answer the questions below using RARE.

- 1) How does the author use the soccer game to highlight Ellie's characteristics?
- 2) Explain how the setting in Ch 15 is contradictory.
- 3) Describe the relationship between Ellie and Heidi. How is this illustrated in Ch 15-16?
- 4) How has the death of Husna's parents affected him?
- 5) Ellie is constantly saying she joined the army to win over hearts and minds. How has she demonstrated this?
- 6) How does Hammed feel about the coalition forces?

Ch 19-20 Response

Directions: Answer the questions below using complete sentences.

1. What does Jackson give to Husna? Why do you think Husna reacts the way he does to the "gift"?
2. What do Jackson's interactions with General Macallum tell us about Jackson?

3. Why is Ellie drawn to Jackson? Why did she leave so suddenly when they were listening to music?
4. Do you think Heidi is aware of Ellie's feelings for Jackson? How do you think she would feel about it if she knew?
5. What is the mood as the troops are walking through the trees off the path? Make sure to support with evidence.
6. What is internal conflict? Explain the internal conflict of one of the characters.

Self-Sacrifice

Answer the questions below in complete sentences. Be prepared to share the answers with the class.

- 1) Summarize the article in one paragraph.
- 2) How does this article embody the concept of self-sacrifice?
- 3) How does this article connect to *Torn*?
- 4) Why did Yugi and Heidi do what they did?

Long Answer Response

Directions: Respond to the questions below in 1-2 paragraphs.

- 1) Is Aroush real or not? Explain
- 2) Respond to the quotation from the book "I'm beginning to realize that in war nothing ever ends happily ever after. Especially not for the kids. I'm guessing all you can hope for is to live long enough to make sense of it."

3) What is foreshadowing? How does the author use foreshadowing throughout the novel? Give examples.

4) Describe Husna then explain his motivation throughout the novel. How is this connected to his last action of shooting down the plane?

Character Reflection

Choose a character from the novel that you identified with the most and write a 1-2 page reflection (typed, single-spaced) from their point of view.

This reflection should include:

- The characters thoughts/feelings on what happened throughout the novel
- Thoughts on other characters that they encountered
- Thoughts and feelings on where they are now and what they are doing

Large Group Discussion

- What is the author's view on war? How does he demonstrate this?
- What other topics/issues related to war does the author consider important? Why? How do you know?
- Think of the characters in the novel. Do you feel empathy for these characters? Explain.

APPENDIX C. FIGURES

Figure C.1

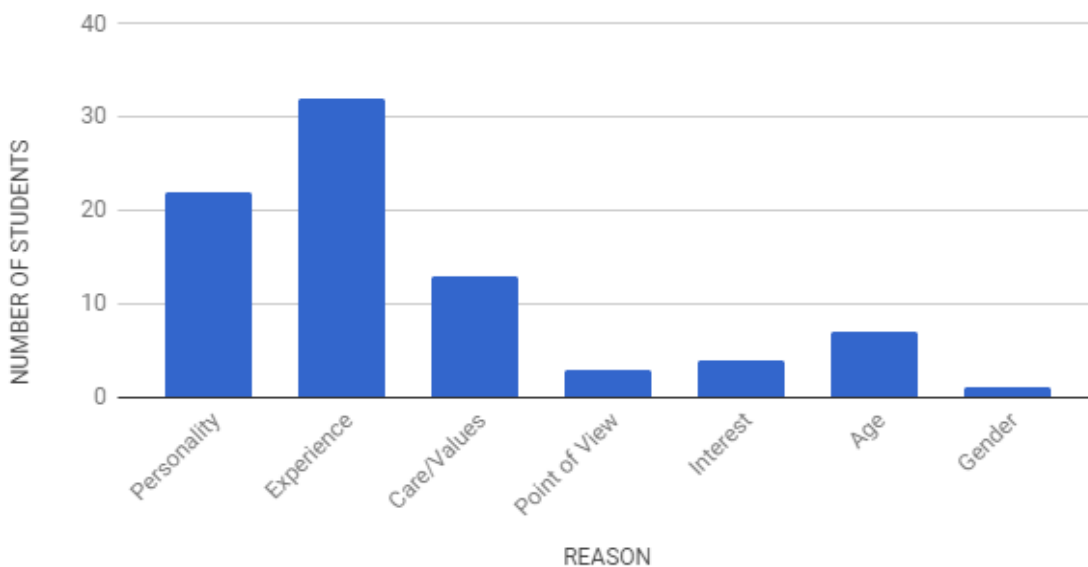
Overall Reasons Empathy

Figure C.2

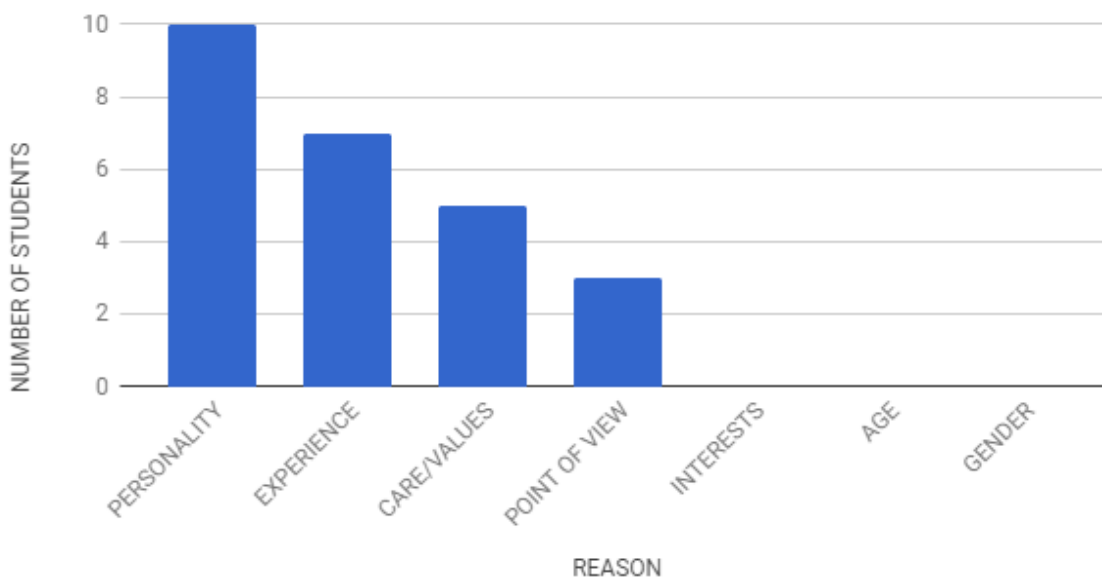
ELLIE

Figure C.3

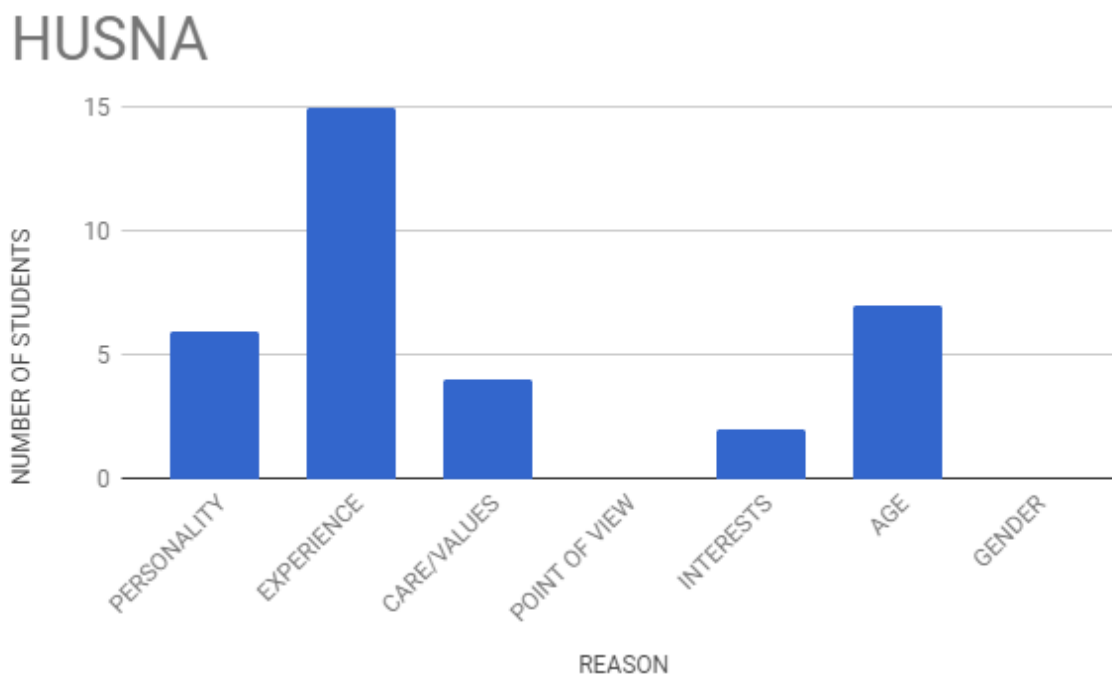


Figure C.4

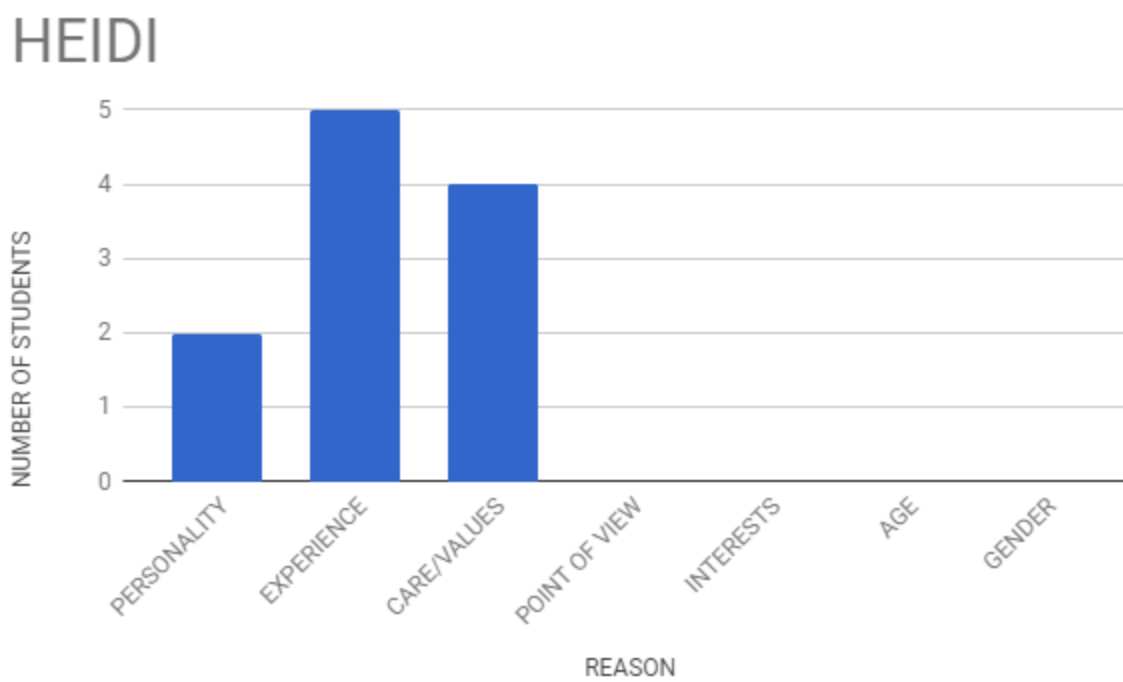


Figure C.5

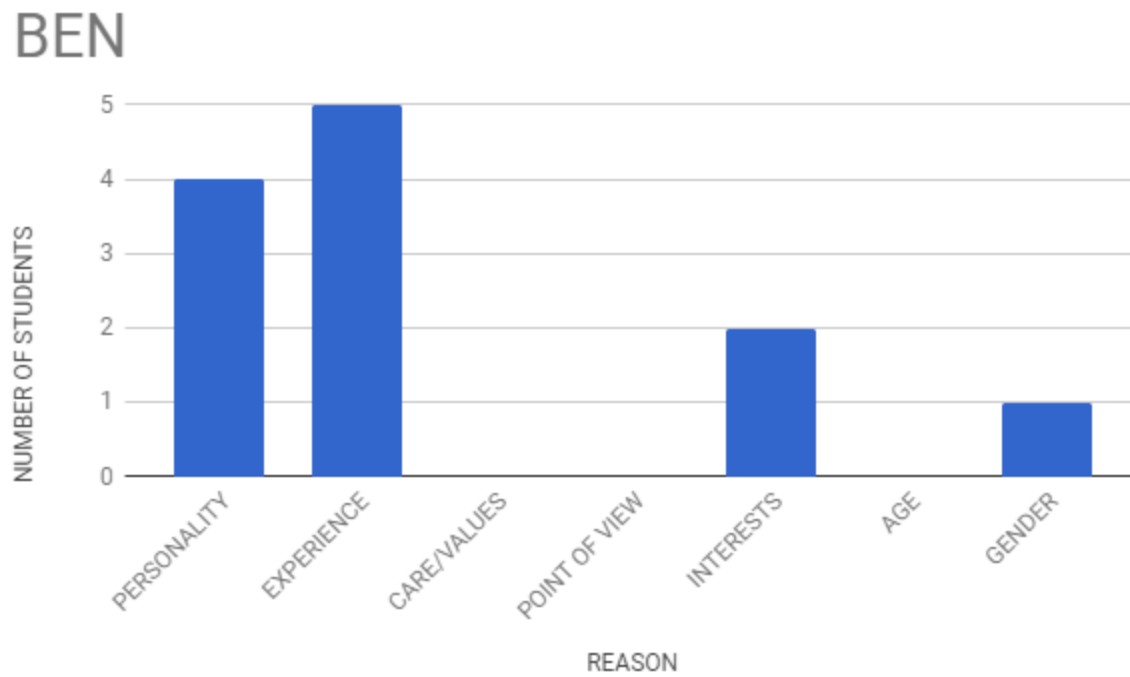


Figure C. 6

